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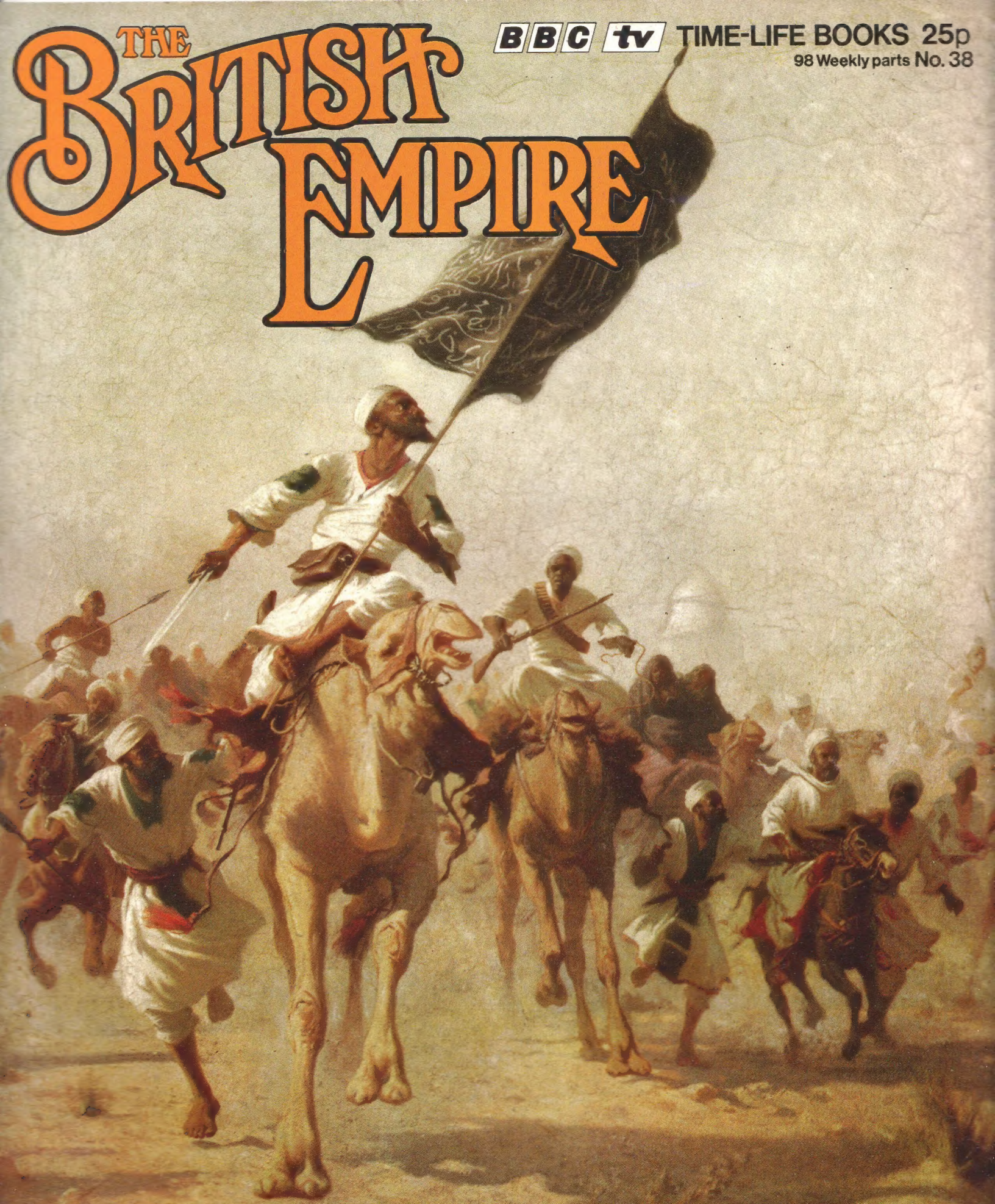

FROM SUEZ TO KHARTOUM
Gordon's Death: Kitchener's Revenge

Australia & New Zealand 70c South Africa 70c Canada 95c

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BY THE WAY

A footnote in the massive *Historiography of the British Empire-Commonwealth*, a bibliographical guide to the subject edited by Robin Winks, mentions that there are well over 300 books on General Gordon. He must be one of the most written about characters in imperial history. Yet few of these works are historically sound. Most, indeed, are adulatory rubbish produced in the welter of sentimental outpouring that surrounded Gordon's death.

A more critical view of Gordon was expressed in 1918 by Lytton Strachey in his *Eminent Victorians*. Strachey delighted in destroying pretensions – the title of his book is somewhat ironic – and he does it with assurance, elegance, wit, and occasional snideness.

He emphasized, for instance, Gordon's drinking habits: "The Holy Bible was not his only solace. For now, under the parching African sun, we catch glimpses, for the first time, of Gordon's hand stretching out towards stimulants of a more material quality. For months together, we are told, he would drink nothing but pure water; and then . . . water that was not so pure. In his fits of melancholy, he would shut himself up in his tent for days at a time . . . until at last the cloud would lift . . . and the Governor would reappear, brisk and cheerful." Because Strachey preferred foibles to fables, he has been dismissed as a "debunker," but his work retains both its literary appeal and importance as a corrective.

There is, by the way, a thoughtful, factual yet thrilling account of Gordon and his death, in Alan Moorehead's *The White Nile*. But new myths spring up as old ones die: in the film *Khartoum*, Gordon and the Mahdi are shown in a dramatic confrontation. Because of the film's apparent authenticity, many people must believe that such a meeting took place. In fact, it never did.

All letters please to: **The British Empire, 76, Oxford Street, London W.1.**

CONTENTS

1037. From Suez to Khartoum
Disraeli's acquisition of a controlling interest in the Suez Canal – the first step in Britain ever-deepening involvement in Egyptian affairs.

1049. Picture Essay: Rout and Revenge
The agonizingly slow advance of Wolseley's relief force up the Nile, Gordon's death in Khartoum at the hands of the Dervishes and Kitchener's bloody revenge at Omdurman 13 years later.

1062. Flashpoint at Fashoda
Kitchener's victory preceded a further advance up the Nile – this time to confront a French force that was threatening to seize the whole of the Upper Nile Valley for France.

Cover: The Dervish forces, defeated by Kitchener at Omdurman in 1898, stream away in confusion across the desert, Gordon's death was revenged.

FROM SUEZ TO KHARTOUM

Between 1870 and 1900, the irresistible demands of strategy and national honour – the need to control the route to India and to revenge General Gordon's death in Khartoum – led to British control of Egypt and the Sudan.

A contemporary cartoon portrays Disraeli winking knowingly at the Sphinx after his dramatic purchase of a controlling interest in the Suez Canal Company.

By Stuart Legg

In the era of the Pharaohs, Jehovah had visited ten plagues upon the land of Egypt. But ever since the Pharaonic civilization had vanished Egypt had suffered, almost without intermission, an eleventh plague, vicious government at the hands of foreign aggressors. Down the centuries Arabs, Mamelukes and Turks had successively conquered her, exploited her, lived in extravagance on the industrious misery of her peasant fellaheen.

Britain had no wish to join the long line of Egypt's alien conquerors. Her vital lifeline to India was the three-month route round the Cape of Good Hope. The Mediterranean, with Egypt at its far south-eastern corner, was of relatively minor concern.

But when Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, British officials were horrified by the nightmarish possibility that he might make for India – only recently secured from the French – by the overland route through the Middle East. Egypt thus acquired a strategic significance for Britain which she was not to lose for more than 150 years – an interest that, accentuated by the building of the Suez Canal in 1869, led Britain irrevocably, and often unwillingly, ever deeper into the mire of Egypt's administration.

The opening of the 19th Century saw a new, preventive British interest in the Mediterranean. The British reaction to Napoleon's invasion had been violent: Nelson had shot the French fleet to shreds in Aboukir Bay. But in British eyes, there remained a long-term threat to the route to India. The lands around the eastern Mediterranean, including Egypt, formed part of the moribund Ottoman Empire. Should it collapse, Russia might sweep southwards or France eastwards, swallowing as much as possible of the Arab world, including Egypt, and thus imperilling India. Accordingly, Gibraltar and Malta became first-line naval bases and Britain prepared to prop up the flagging Turkish regime. At the same time she let it be known that she would tolerate no rival foreign presence in Turkish Egypt.

Napoleon's incursion, however, had impelled Egypt along a new course. From the turmoil created by this first glimpse of European methods and manners, sprang a new house of rulers, who set

Said Pasha, the extrovert Egyptian Viceroy, was delighted to grant his friend Ferdinand de Lesseps the right to dig the Suez Canal.

Ismail Pasha, Said's successor, so impoverished Egypt that he had to sell the country's Canal shares to Disraeli.

themselves to bridge the gulf between their backward Turkish colony and modern Europe.

The first of these rulers – or Viceroys of the Sultan – was Mohammed Ali, the "Father of Modern Egypt." A formidable, colourful scoundrel who had been an Albanian soldier in the Turkish service, he clamped a ruthless dictatorship on the country, started industries, introduced the large-scale cultivation of long-staple cotton and began a system of perennial irrigation. Above all, he built up a massive army which he sent ravaging through Anatolia and Greece to the threshold of Constantinople; in the process, he won for himself a measure of autonomy from the Sultan of Turkey, who remained his overlord, though his control was only nominal.

Soon afterwards Mohammed Ali allowed a British officer, Lieutenant Waghorn, to organize an Overland Route between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. Steamships started to voyage regularly from London to Alexandria, and from Suez to Bombay, with Waghorn's river boats and pack-animals bridging the land barrier between and cutting the journey to India to one month.

By the time of Mohammed Ali's death in 1849 Britain was well content with her position in the Mediterranean: she had provided for the landward defence of her eastern empire and she had gained a second route to India.

But in 1854, Said, a member of Mohammed Ali's house, succeeded to the viceregal throne. Enormous and obese, extravagant and jovial, he too was a despot; his ideas, however, were well intentioned and even liberal. His permissive good nature opened the country to an influx of privileged European residents – traders, technicians, experts and promoters of all sorts.

Among the latter was Ferdinand de Lesseps, a Frenchman obsessed with a dream: a canal piercing the Isthmus of Suez, and providing a new sea-route from the Western Hemisphere to the Eastern, thus shortening the route to India.

De Lesseps had no official standing with the French government. He was neither engineer nor financier. But he was a man of extraordinary persuasiveness and perseverance, and a personal friend of the new Viceroy. One evening, during some army manoeuvres in the desert at which Said was present, de Lesseps talked

him into giving permission for the realization of his idea. And he further persuaded the Viceroy into granting him absurdly generous concessions: large areas of land adjacent to the proposed route of his canal together with handsome mineral rights, and free forced labour for the construction. These promises secured, the dynamic Frenchman rushed to and fro between Cairo and the capitals of Europe, expounding his vision, exorcizing doubts, mobilizing support for his projected Suez Canal Company.

From the start, official Britain was opposed to the whole project. In the first place, London was entirely satisfied with the Cape and Overland routes to India. And in the second, though de Lesseps was a lone wolf, he was French: inevitably his enterprise would once again place an ominous French presence between England and her empire in the East. "At present India is unattackable," the Foreign Office warned. "It will no longer be so when Bombay is only 4,600 miles from Marseilles [by sea]." But as at this moment Britain and France, in one of their rare alliances, were fighting side by side to contain Russia in the Crimea, Britain's efforts to scotch the Canal scheme could only be of a limited and indirect character.

The project itself staggered through a series of financial crises. The French subscribers to the Canal's shares were not eager to pay up. The Ottoman Empire failed to take up any of the shares reserved for it, a problem which de Lesseps solved by simply transferring the Ottoman shares to Said's account.

To complicate matters further, Said, having accepted the added liability for Egypt, died. His successor, Ismail, was far less pliable. He was an ugly, squat man, with a defective eye and tufts of red hair sprouting from his face, and his ungainly exterior concealed something of the unshakable self-confidence of his grandfather, Mohammed Ali. One of his first acts was to demand the revision of Said's concessions regarding land, mineral rights, and slave labour. Construction ceased. London was jubilant.

But it was not the end. The Company claimed compensation, and the arbitrator – Napoleon III, Emperor of the French – awarded it £3 million, or nearly half the original capital. In addition, Ismail agreed to pay £3 million more, from the future dividends to be realized on his own shares – in return for a promise of immunity from further claims. Egypt had thus shouldered almost the whole cost of the Canal, signed away her dividends, and was left with nothing. And it was not Ismail, but Egypt herself – her patient, already over-taxed fellaheen – who would ultimately have to find the money.

As if this monstrous burden was not enough, when the arduous, ten-year task of building the canal was at last finished, de Lesseps spent another £2 million on the ceremonies that marked the completion and opening of the Canal. On November 17, 1869, the French imperial yacht, with the Empress Eugénie waving from the bridge, led a procession of 51 ships from Port Said to Suez and back, in one of the most grandiose spectacles ever staged.

The Canal was only the first stage on Ismail's road to ruin. By means of enormous bribes he carried on his forebears' struggle against the Sultan, winning among other rights the title of "Khedive," or Prince: this alone cost him a million pounds in cash and a gold dinner service set with gems for the Sultan's table. Still convinced of his astute business sense, he spent money like water on his own lavish living, and on public works of every kind: palaces, harbours, bridges, railways, ships. Bricks and mortar, metal and glass, burgeoned into new buildings on every hand.

Word spread that Egypt was a splendid field for bankers. And no wonder – for the finance came from Europe, at shocking prices. Loan followed loan from Goschen's, Oppenheim's, Bischofsheim's, Rothschild's. At last in 1875, as the net of foreign bankers, contractors and agents began to tighten, Ismail had to fall back on his only real assets to raise cash for the interest on his loans: he let it be known that his Canal shares were for sale.

It was then that Disraeli stepped in. Already the Canal was changing the pattern of ocean trade; already British shipping was its major user. It was clear that having failed to prevent the Canal, Britain must aim to control it.

Parliament was not in session. The only means of obtaining the money was by a temporary loan. And the only bank able to advance £4 million quickly was the house of Rothschild.

Montague Corry, Disraeli's private secretary, gave a dramatic account of how he sped to the City and laid the request before Baron Lionel de Rothschild:

"'When do you want it?'

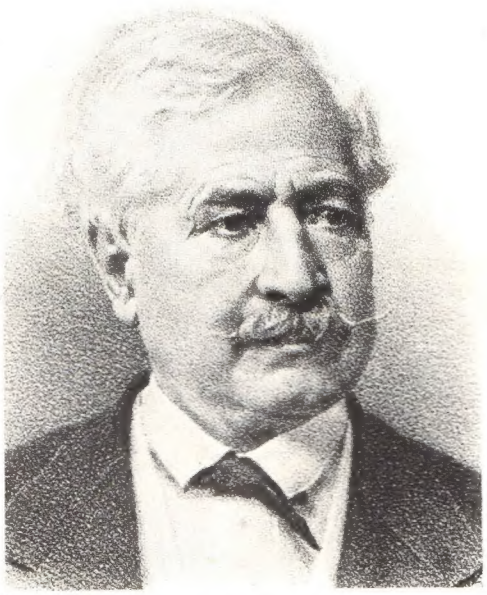
"'Tomorrow.'

"'What is your security?'

"'The British Government.'

"Rothschild took a muscatel grape from a bunch at his side, ate it, and carefully removed the skin from his mouth.

"'You shall have it.'"



French engineer de Lesseps realized a life-long ambition when he linked the Mediterranean to the Red Sea in 1869.

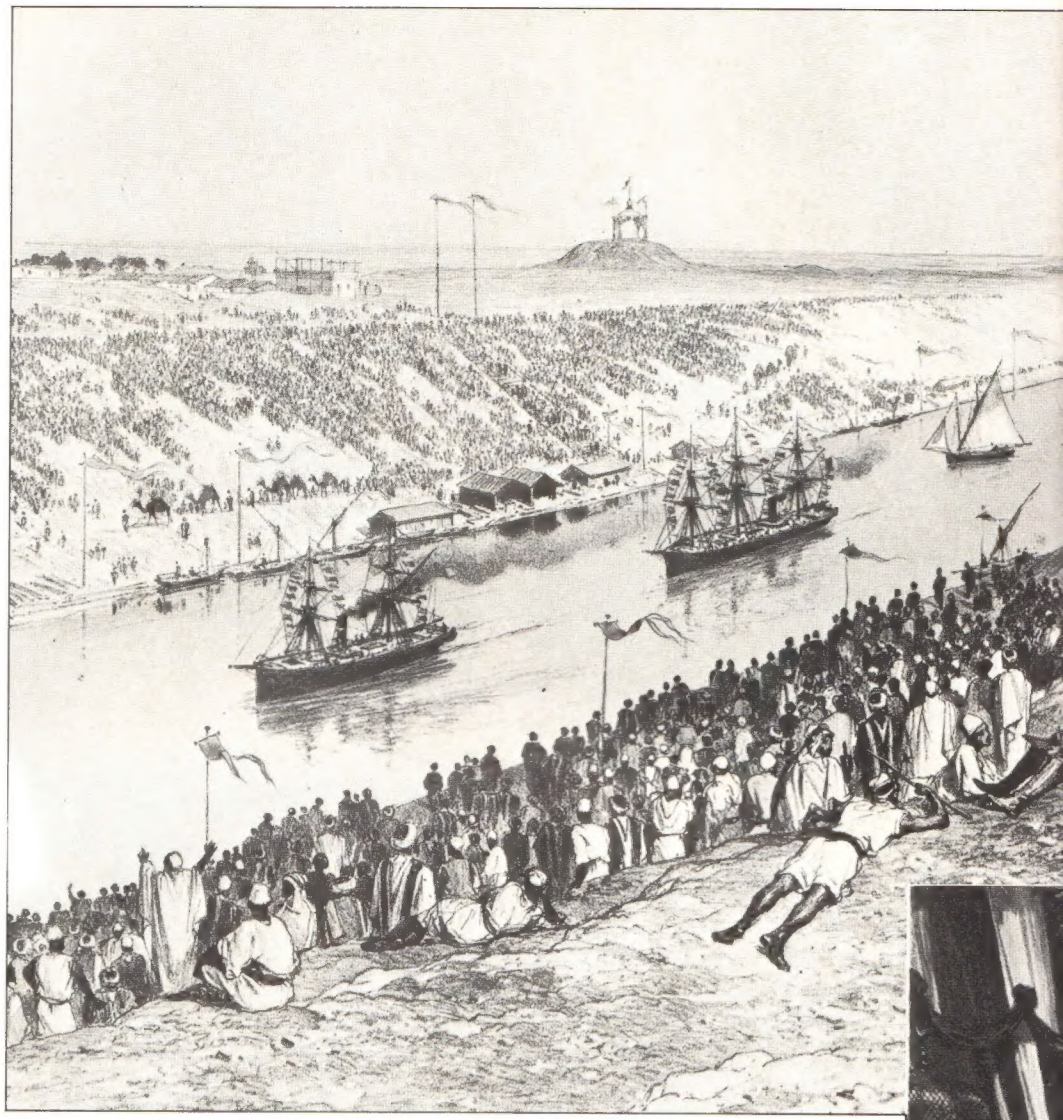
Financier Lionel de Rothschild loaned Disraeli £4 million to buy the Canal stock – and made a handsome profit for his bank.

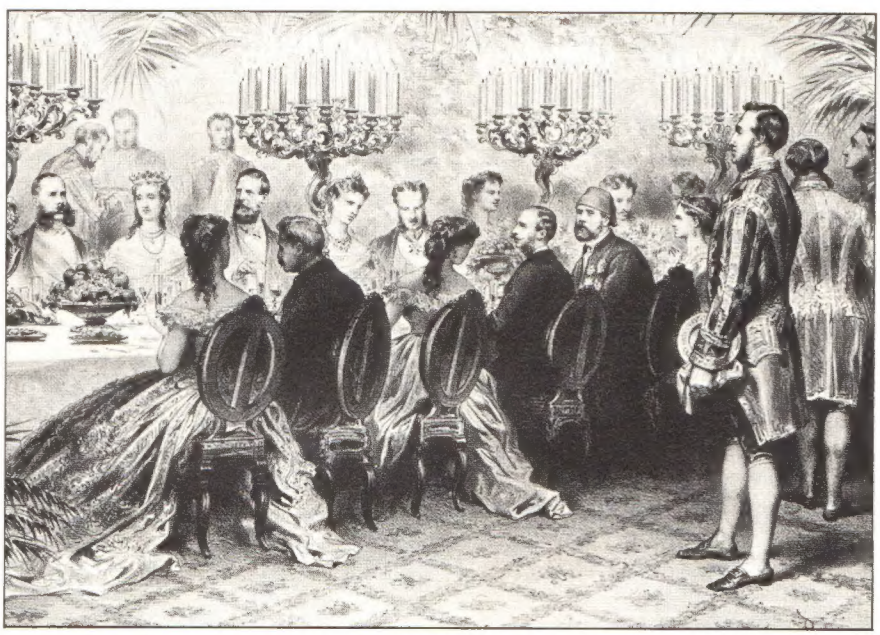
Corry's story probably lost nothing in the telling. But within a few days of the interview Britain stood possessed of 44 per cent of the capital of the Suez Canal Company. It was the point of no return on the road that was leading to her direct intervention first in Egypt, then in the Sudan: an intervention forced upon her by the politics of Empire and the facts of imperial geography.

The £4 million Disraeli paid for Ismail's shares quickly melted away. The Egyptian foreign debt was soaring to the £100 million mark. All along the Nile the *kurbash* – the rhinoceros-hide lash that had always been the tax-collector's pitiless instrument of extraction – was busier than ever. But no more could be flogged from the fellaheen. In April, 1876 debt payments were postponed for the first time. Egypt was bankrupt.

Jeremiah had prophesied that "Egypt was to be delivered to the children of the north." Now it was coming to pass: the European creditors raised their cry. Germany, Austria, Italy, Turkey, were all involved, but the principal foreign powers concerned were Britain and France. The nationals of both were owed huge sums, but more important were the imperial factors that were at stake. Britain had gained virtual control of the Canal's finances; the Canal lay wholly within Egyptian territory; Britain could not now stand aside from the finances and the future of Egypt herself. France was equally concerned for a different reason: she was building her empire in North Africa, and one day Egypt might be required as its eastern pivot.

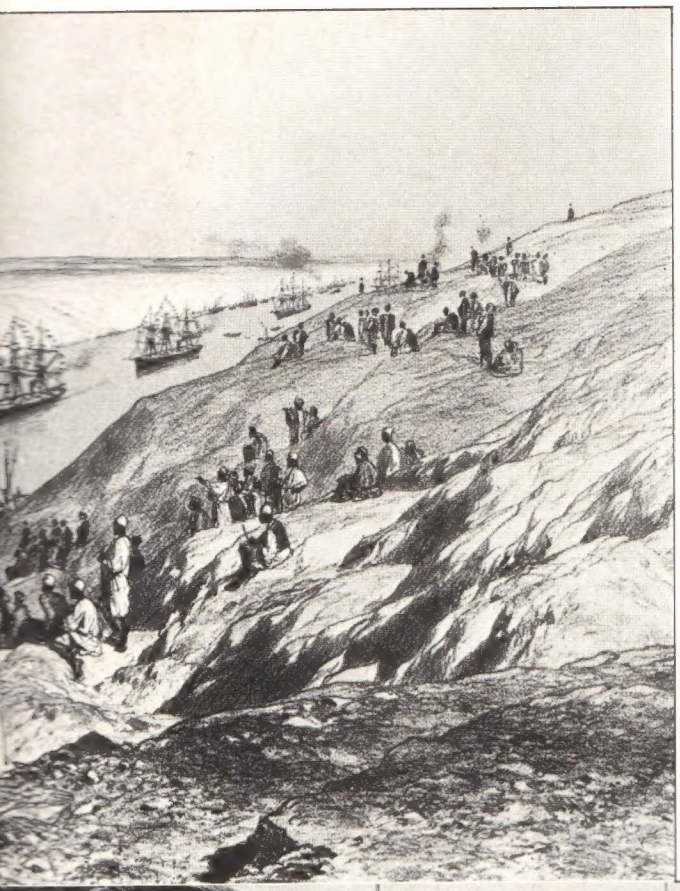
Cautiously the two imperial powers came together to press on Ismail a Commission of the Debt – "like a dog and a cat taking a mouse for a walk," as an Egyptian put it. To this foreign receivership the Khedive consented: but then, in a final attempt to wriggle from the grasp of Europe, he tried to stir up Pan-Islamic hatred of the alien – to raise an army of volunteers to rid the country of the infidel usurer. But the *kurbash* had seared Egypt's back too deeply: the sullen villages failed to respond. At the demand of Britain and France the Sultan deposed Ismail, and on June 30, 1879, he sailed



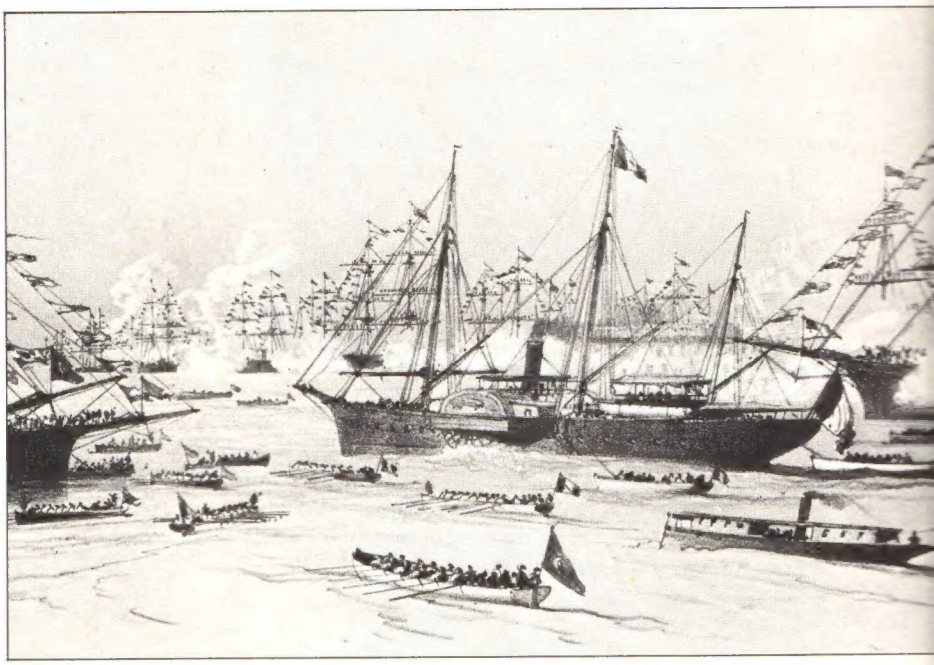


A sumptuous banquet is given by Ferdinand de Lesseps for the Empress Eugénie and Ismail Pasha the night before the official opening of his ship canal.

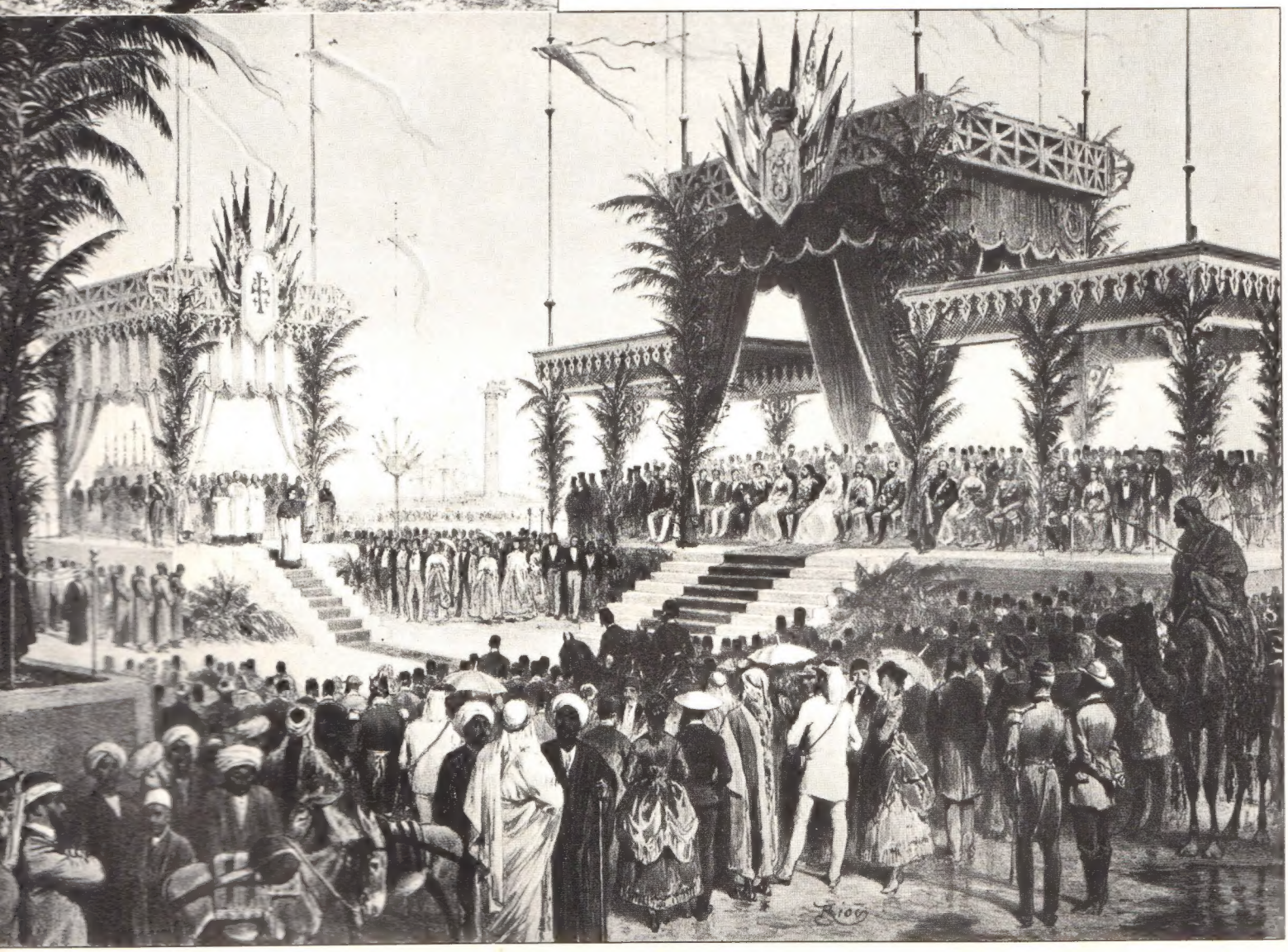
Ismail Pasha and the Empress Eugénie, seated on a lavishly decorated dais, preside over the festivities with which the Canal was opened.

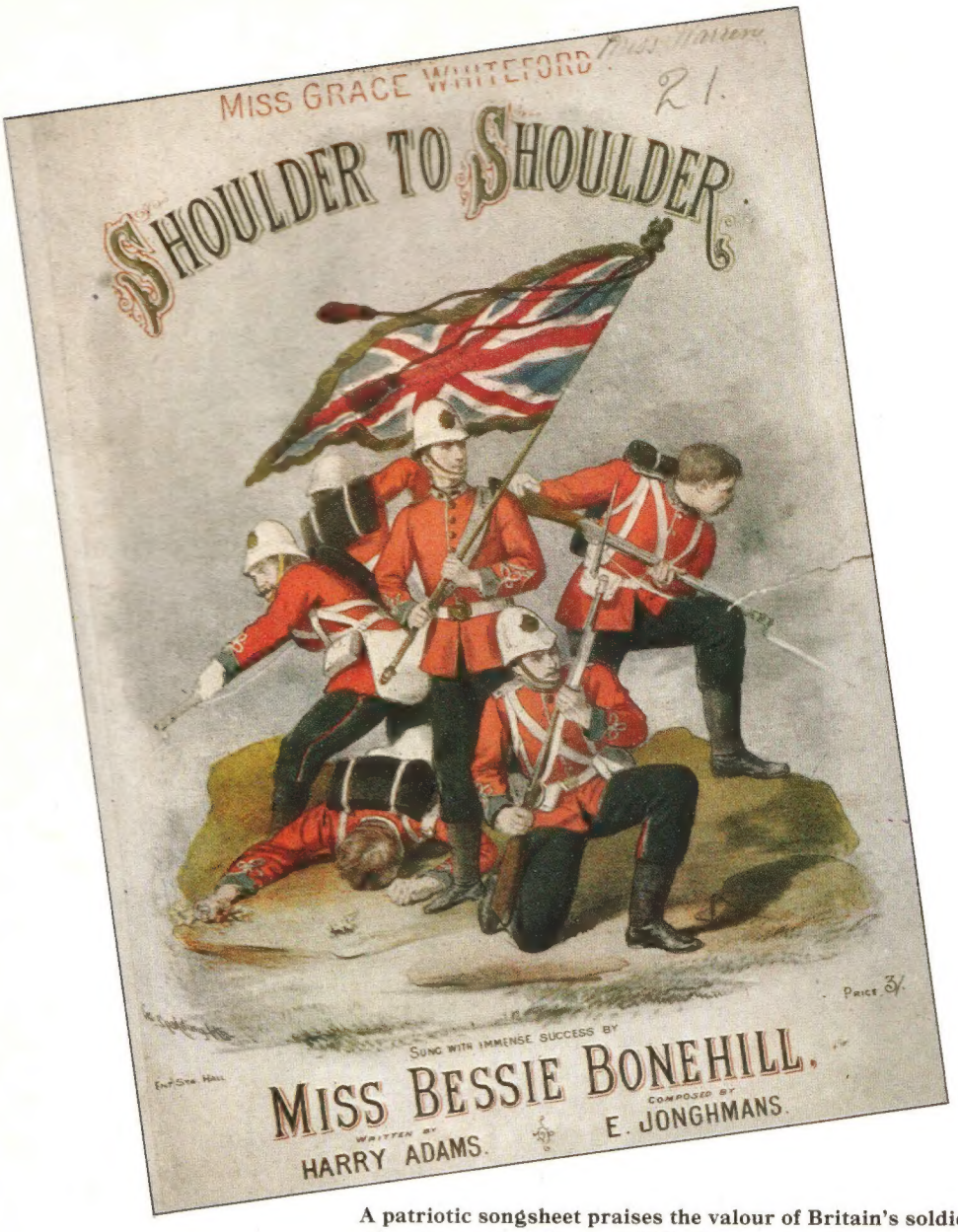


Watched by admiring crowds of Egyptians, ships of the French Mediterranean Fleet glide south along the new canal.



Napoleon III's paddle-steamer *Eagle*, with the Empress Eugénie aboard, steams past French warships at the inauguration of the Suez Canal on November 17, 1869.





A patriotic songsheet praises the valour of Britain's soldiers who won a great victory at Tel-el-Kebir in 1882.

away in the royal yacht *Mahroussa* with all the jewels he could snatch.

With Ismail's departure the "Dual Control" of Britain and France virtually took over the management of Egypt's finances. Ismail's son, the new Khedive Tewfik, found himself in fiscal fetters. But the uneasy partnership of the two European powers was not to last. Neither had reckoned with the hitherto muted voice of the people of the Nile valley, and that voice now began to speak – through the mouth of Ahmed Bey Arabi.

Arabi was a colonel in the Egyptian army, and the army embodied much popular feeling, for its rank and file were drawn from the fellaheen. And Arabi was a man of the people: the son of a village sheik, somewhat arrogant and boastful, but simple, slow-spoken and sincere. The army, moreover, had grievances, for the Sultan in Constantinople still maintained the control over it which he had insisted upon keeping in Mohammed Ali's time. Most of the senior officers were Turks, not Egyptians, pay and allowances had been drastically cut back. Arabi petitioned for the army, but in effect his demands went much wider. He called for an end to the corruption of the Turkish upper class in Egypt, and for a halt in the growing foreign interference in the affairs of his impoverished country.

Arabi was arrested and brought before a Council of Ministers. But his peasant troops burst in, toppled the Council from their chairs, emptied inkpots over their heads and, with guffaws of laughter, chased them out through the windows. Political upheaval followed, and Tewfik was compelled to accept Arabi as a minister in a new government.

Alarm seized the creditor nations at the prospect of revolution. The British press – and even the Liberal, anti-imperial Gladstone, now Prime Minister – denounced Arabi as a mutineer and a bloodthirsty fanatic. The Europeans utterly failed to understand that Arabi was the national spirit of an Egypt becoming, for the first time, articulate.

Diplomatic telegrams flew about Europe. Britain and France drafted a joint note affirming their support of Tewfik; requested the Sultan to send a force; called an international conference; augmented their naval squadrons in Egyptian waters. None of this had any real effect. Savage rioting broke out in Alexandria in the course of which European diplomats were manhandled and a large number of Christians killed. Arabi, angered by the menacing foreign warships, began to dig emplacements round the nearby forts, and to train his guns to seaward. On London's instructions the British admiral called on him to stop. He complied: but then resumed the work. On the morning of July 11, 1882, the British ships opened fire.

All day the bombardment of Alexandria continued. And on the flagship's bridge, watching the bursting shells and flying masonry, stood a tall mustachioed young army subaltern on his first visit to Egypt, Herbert Kitchener, who was to play a dominant role in future Anglo-Egyptian affairs. By 5 p.m. the forts were wrecked. Inside the flaming town, infuriated Egyptians ran wild, seeking out and destroying anything belonging to foreigners. British marines landed to restore order.

The day's events nearly brought down the British government. Gladstone took refuge behind a barrage of verbiage. But under pressure from his colleagues and from the Opposition, he at length reluctantly agreed that it was essential to replace anarchy and conflict in Egypt by peace and order: "Failing the cooperation of Europe, this work will be undertaken by the single power of England."

Europe – or rather France – had indeed

failed to cooperate so far. France had taken no part in the bombardment, and for a curious reason: Bismarck, the German Chancellor, had suddenly seen fit to urge the French to take an active hand in the Egyptian crisis. His meaning was veiled: but with vivid memories of 1870, when France had been devastatingly crushed by the Germans, the French may be excused for thinking that Bismarck's purpose might be sinister – especially as a large part of the French army was heavily committed in Algeria and Tunisia, a considerable distance away from the homeland. At the critical moment the French squadron vanished westward over the horizon. Britain was left alone to deal with Arabi, to keep the Canal open for her own shipping, and to assure Egypt's future on behalf of the creditors.

The first task was quickly discharged. With 20,000 men, General Sir Garnet Wolseley, the hero of imperial campaigns in Canada and Africa, steamed into the Canal past a gesticulating figure – de Lesseps – standing on the quay, horrified at the possibility that his canal might be damaged in the hostilities. A month later British bayonets routed Arabi's forces at Tel-el-Kebir, and Arabi himself led the flight of the defeated Egyptians. Britain had wanted neither the Canal nor Egypt: she now, ineluctably, had both.

The longer, heavier burden fell on Sir Evelyn Baring, a member of the famous banking family, who had served in the Indian administration. With the modest title of British Agent and Consul-General, he was henceforth to govern Egypt for nearly a quarter of a century. Patient and adroit, Baring was to prove himself one of the most outstanding of the British imperial pro-consuls.

One commitment at least could be avoided. Britain was careful not to annex Egypt; she would, instead, administer the country through the most suitable Egyptian government she could find until Egypt could stand on its own feet. Even so, the difficulties facing Baring were acute. He could assure his own authority internally, for he was backed by the power of London and by the British occupation forces on the spot. But wherever Egypt's international liabilities were concerned, he had to take account of all the European creditors; in trying to steer a course which would satisfy all, he inevitably satisfied very few.

France, especially, had no intention of being satisfied. She had withdrawn of her own will: but now, jealous of Britain's increased power in the Middle East, she reverted to her previous role of irritant and rival. At every turn she embarrassed Baring by demanding to know when the British would implement their intention to leave Egypt.

Baring had hardly been installed when the British in Egypt were faced by a new threat from the south. Stretching from Wadi Halfa towards the great lakes of Africa, and from the Red Sea to the Sahara, lay a vast expanse of desert and scrub threaded by the Upper Nile. Its name, the Sudan, derived from the Arabic word *suda* – black – for it was peopled by tribes, some of Arab origin, and others, more primitive, of black Nilotic stock.

Two major industries dominated this huge territory: ivory and slaves. The search for ivory caused the slaughter of thousands of elephants each year, but far worse were the depredations of the slave trade. This was carried on by highly organized raids of Arab horsemen, fanatic Muslims, utterly ruthless, scouring the interior on regular circuits. In the 15 years from 1860, in only three provinces of the Sudan, more than 400,000 people had

Neither this gun, nor any of the other artillery captured at Tel-el-Kebir, ever fired a shot, so overwhelming was the British dawn assault on the Egyptian trenches.

been seized and sold, and countless numbers more had died. Some of the tribes were approaching extinction.

From early times Egypt had pushed southwards beyond Wadi Halfa into the wild cruel land of the Sudan for distances corresponding to the ebb and flow of her power. But Mohammed Ali had fastened a more lasting hold on it, and his successors had enlarged the rudimentary regime he had established. By 1880 some 40,000 Egyptian troops were spread through garrison-posts across the Sudan, enforcing with their guns the rule of a Governor-General in Khartoum.

Except for a few years when English appointees of Ismail – among them a certain Charles Gordon – had held key posts, Egyptian rule had been evil. Her soldiery plundered the natives who lived round their forts, and Egyptian officialdom skimmed the cream off the country as a whole. Their corruption was nourished by the slave trade: all of them took their cut on the traffic in human flesh as it passed on its helpless way to the markets of Cairo and Constantinople. Everywhere there was poverty, oppression and a rising tide of acute disaffection.

In 1881 an obscure man of religion, by name Mohammed Ahmed el-Sayyid Abdullah, fired the spark into the tinderbox of the Sudan. From his retreat on an island in the Upper Nile he proclaimed himself the long-expected Mahdi – the Guided One of the Prophet – and began a campaign of preaching. The time had come, he urged, to make an end of the Egyptians and their Turkish overlords, and to return to the purity of the true faith. The moment was indeed ripe, for the Khedive Ismail had been dethroned in Cairo, and in consequence Turko-Egyptian authority in the Sudan was weakened. The Mahdi's fervent eloquence magnetized first the downtrodden local population, then some of the most warlike of the tribes.

An Egyptian force sent from Khartoum to arrest him retired in haste. A second was hacked to pieces. And a month before the British bombardment of Alexandria, a larger punitive force met the same fate. In Cairo, fear for the whole Egyptian establishment in the Sudan was growing.

The Mahdi's swelling horde of warriors, clad in their rough jibbahs sewn with patches to symbolize virtuous poverty, were getting beyond Egyptian capacity to counter. Then, in January, 1883, came news that the town of El-Obeid, the provincial capital of Kordofan, with its well-stocked arsenal and treasury, had fallen to the Mahdi. This success vastly increased the numbers flocking to the Mahdi's banner. Revolt was mushrooming into civil war.

At that very moment, Britain was taking over in Egypt. She was preoccupied with Egyptian problems, and she refused to extend her intervention to the Upper Nile. "Her Majesty's Government," the Foreign Secretary, Earl Granville, declared, "are in no way responsible for operations in the Sudan." If the Egyptian officials wished to act, that was their affair.

That government could not swallow the affront involved in a withdrawal. A supreme effort must be made to suppress the Mahdi. Accordingly, a scratch contingent of some 15,000 men – many of them criminals from the gaols – was assembled and placed under Colonel Hicks, a retired British officer from India.

The Mahdi, whose devotion to his religion was fanatical, cursed Gordon for his Christianity and repeatedly advised him to embrace Islam if he hoped to escape the perpetual torment reserved for unbelievers.

Charles George Gordon was ready to die for Britain. Yet he never wanted to return to it. He said: "I would sooner live like a Dervish . . . than go out . . . every night in London."

Hicks had no illusions about his force, but he was determined to do his best for his Egyptian employers. Despite doubtful guides, he struck west from Khartoum into the savage deserts of Kordofan. A few weeks later the Mahdi's main army fell upon his thirsty exhausted men. The disaster was so complete that only 300 wounded survivors crawled away into the tamarisk scrub. The rest, including poor William Hicks, were dead.

The position in the Sudan was now desperate. Baring laid the choice before London: a British expeditionary force, or total withdrawal. London held to its policy: Egypt must come first, even if it meant – as it did – installing a new government in Cairo that would agree to evacuate the Sudan. But how to get the garrisons out? Made up of handfuls of men, some were strung out along nearly 2,000 miles of the White and Blue Niles, others were scattered deep in the interior. The task would require a man of exceptional calibre. At this point someone in the War Office – it has never been clear who – mentioned the name of Major-General Charles George Gordon.

Gordon was one of the last of the fabled Victorian eccentrics. Short, slight, sunburnt, he seemed to prance on his tiptoes everywhere he went, boundless boyish energy shining from his bright blue eyes. He had fought with distinction in the Crimea; but he was far too unorthodox for the steady climb to the top in the British army. Instead he had taken service with other governments, with most of whom he had eventually quarrelled. As a result of his daredevil exploits on behalf of the Manchu dynasty in the Taiping rebellion – in which he had shown himself a supreme leader of irregular troops – he had been universally acclaimed as "Chinese Gordon."

Whatever spare time Gordon's worldly battles allowed had been devoted to the Bible, and to good works among the poor. From his incessant readings of the former he had evolved his own mystical, fatalistic approach to Christianity: by his open-handed pursuit of the latter he had sometimes found himself on the verge of personal bankruptcy. He was probably the most brilliant commando officer alive, and at the same time a man of passionate feeling for the underdog. For the task of organizing an abject retreat, of unsparingly abandoning those unable to join it, no one could possibly have been more ill-fitted.

Gordon was no stranger to the Sudan. He had spent nearly six whirlwind years there, in the service of the Khedive Ismail. He had first been Governor of the southernmost province, Equatoria, where he had mapped the Nile to within 60 miles of its source, driven out the local slave traders, built forts along the river and forced the Egyptian garrisons into good behaviour towards the neighbouring tribes. It was said that he had made the remote, dangerous region safe for a lone traveller, even one armed only with a walking-stick.

But Gordon's compulsive activity had allowed him not a moment's rest, and the terrible climate had struck at his health. In a fit of depression he had given up, writing to his sister that "I have a sort of wish that I could get rid of Col. Gordon."

Within a few months he was back, again at the plea of Ismail, this time as Governor-General of the entire Sudan. He refused to accept more than half of his £6,000 salary; and as before he drove

A stained-glass window at the Surrey school founded to honour Gordon shows him watching for the relief that never came.

himself to the limit of his strength against the cruelty and corruption around him. In Khartoum his trim white-clad figure, ceaselessly trotting to and fro, red fez above blazing blue eyes, became for the wretched native population the hope of a better lot. Out on the camel-tracks Gordon became equally familiar as he rode from end to end of the country, grappling with the slavers, rooting out venal officials, appointing young Europeans, his faithful disciples, to posts of responsibility.

Then, once more, despondency overtook him. He began to despair of the conduct of his Egyptian troops, to doubt whether slavery could ever be eradicated in a Muslim country. Again he was assailed by his own inadequacy: "Nothing shocks me but myself." On Ismail's removal he had finally resigned. The old sleazy Egyptian regime had returned to the Sudan. And Gordon, a bygone hero in his late forties, was in virtual retirement in England, on the shelf.

His appointment at the height of the crisis created by the Mahdi was partly due to the aura of romance that still surrounded him. In part it was probably

Crude bronze medals were struck in Khartoum during the siege, and Gordon distributed them to deserving soldiers whenever morale took a turn for the worse.

brought about by the more imperially-minded men in Gladstone's entourage: by those like Lord Hartington, the Minister of War, and General Wolseley. For while it was under discussion, Gordon gave a forthright interview to an influential editor – W.T.Stead of the *Pall Mall Gazette* – in which he emphasized his belief that the Mahdist fire might sweep the entire Muslim world unless it was stamped out. Nevertheless, he accepted the British government's orders, which were to go to Khartoum, arrange the evacuation of the Sudan, and attempt nothing further.

Baring was strongly opposed to the choice of Gordon, but at length – to his bitter self-reproach later – he concurred in it. The two men had met during Gordon's spell in the Sudan. Now, in Cairo, they came face to face again. Their comments on each other underlined the gulf between them. Baring, said Gordon, "has a pretentious, grand, patronizing way about him." Gordon, said Baring, "was hot-headed, impulsive, and swayed by his emotions. He knew nothing of the springs of action which move governing bodies." Yet Baring, having concurred, was fair and helpful. He agreed, and obtained the Khedive Tewfik's consent to Gordon's request that he should re-enter Khartoum in his former role of Governor-General of the Sudan.

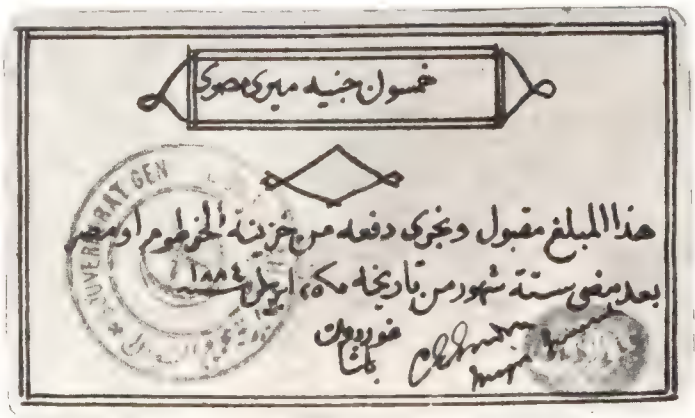
Khartoum itself had not yet been threatened by the Mahdi's host. Communications with Egypt were still open, and the country round was in the hands of loyal tribes. Gordon received a delirious welcome in the city, and instantly set about strengthening its morale. Chains were struck from prisoners, bonfires made of debt records, whips and branding-irons from the torture-chambers piled up and destroyed.

His energy ablaze, Gordon pelted Baring in Cairo with up to 30 telegrams a day, producing a spate of new ideas for dealing with the emergency, then cancelling them in favour of newer brainwaves. "I have received a fresh batch of telegrams from Gordon," Baring wearily reported to London. "His statements and proposals are hopelessly contradictory." He implored Gordon to think things out calmly, then embody his suggestions in a single message. But it was becoming clear that the furore in Gordon's mind was blurring the stark simplicity of his orders. He was certain that seasoned British and Indian troops could readily rout the Mahdi. And he made an ominous pledge never to leave Khartoum himself until everyone else under his command had had a chance to go.

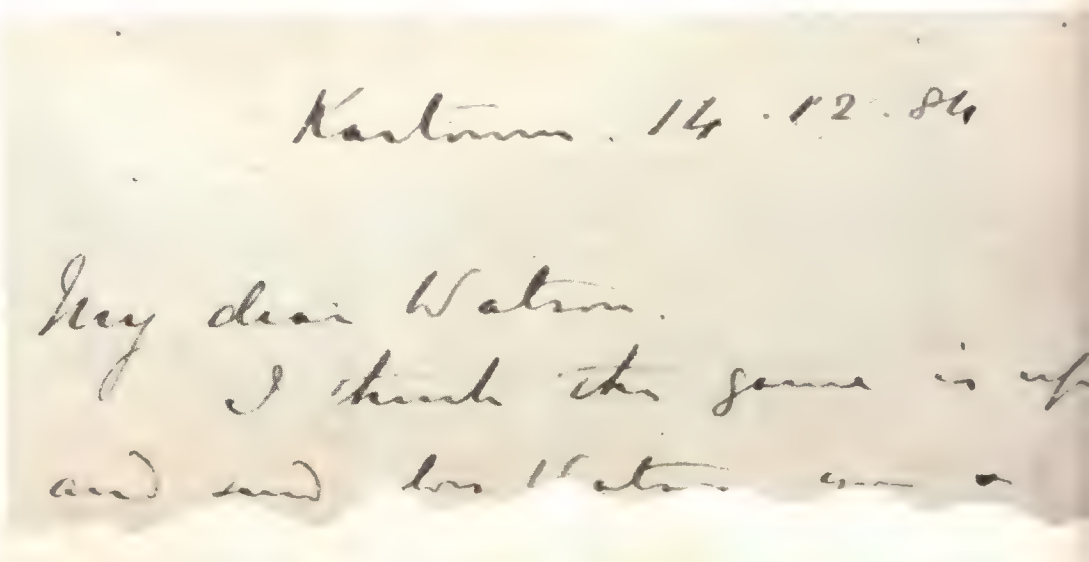
Then, suddenly, the telegraph line went dead. The tribes between Khartoum and the Egyptian frontier at Wadi Halfa had risen for the Mahdi. His grip was tightening. It was no longer a question of how to evacuate the garrison, but of how to get Gordon himself out.

The grip was tightening, but the city could still breathe. It had 8,000 defenders, six months' food, and a flotilla of steamers on the Nile. Runners could still get through the lines. Gordon himself could easily have slipped out to safety. And now that the outlying garrisons were beyond help it was his duty, in the eyes of the British government, to do so. But nothing was farther from Gordon's mind. The unhappy Egyptian soldiers in Khartoum, the bewildered population of the city: these, in the sight of the Lord, were

General Herbert Stewart struggled towards besieged Khartoum in a vain attempt to rescue Gordon.



Paper money, printed during the siege of Khartoum, was accepted by merchants so long as there was food to buy and sell.


Kartoum. 14.12.84

My dear Watson.

I think the game is up

and send his Watson [illegible]

Gordon sent this last letter from Khartoum to an old friend, Colonel Watson. After predicting that all was lost he made his farewells and remarked tersely that it was no use crying over spilt milk.

Gordon's personal charges. If he could not take them with him, he would remain at their head to the end.

Spring dragged into summer. The messages from Khartoum dwindled. All over England the pressure to rescue Gordon rose to insistent levels. The Queen, as ever, expressed the public's feelings unerringly. "You are bound to try and save him," she stormed at the Marquess of Hartington, the Secretary for War, who had been all for sending Gordon in the first place. "You have incurred fearful responsibility." And still the government did nothing to mount a rescue.

In effect, all through the summer of 1884 a silent battle of wills was raging, across the deserts and the seas, between two men: between Gordon in Khartoum, with his deep conviction that to leave his people to their fate would be "the climax of meanness," and Gladstone in London, with his abhorrence of subjecting the Sudan to imperial occupation and his belief that Gordon was trying to blackmail him into ordering it.

Then, in late summer, Hartington threatened to resign. This would have doomed the government; for in his solid phlegmatic way he reflected the image of John Bull. Gladstone gave in. By the end of September Wolseley was leaving Cairo at the head of a relieving force.

In Khartoum, the situation was becoming critical. Food was still in sufficient supply. But some 800 of Gordon's soldiers had been killed in a battle with the Mahdi's men at the outskirts of the town, and the population was losing heart. Every morning the Governor-General trotted on his rounds of the fortifications, encouraging, inspecting, shoring up the shrinking defences. Then he would climb to the roof of his palace and spend lonely hours with his telescope, watching the Mahdi's horsemen manoeuvring in the nearby desert, straining to see any sign of relief rounding the glinting reachings of the river. He decided to send one of his steamers – the *Abbas* – downstream with Colonel Stewart, his second-in-command, in search of immediate help.

Meanwhile Wolseley was making painfully slow progress up the Nile. Both Major Kitchener, sent ahead to establish contact with Khartoum, and Gordon himself from the beleaguered city, urged the use of a lighter, swifter flying column. The expedition continued its steady march. Soon the Nile began its annual fall. The boats carrying ammunition and supplies became more difficult to handle. The pace slowed further.

Then daunting news reached Gordon in the form of a letter from the Mahdi. The *Abbas* had been captured. Stewart and most of the boat's complement had been put to death. And all the information she was carrying about the increasing plight of Khartoum had fallen into enemy hands. "Now," the Mahdi concluded menacingly, "we understand everything." He demanded that Gordon capitulate voluntarily: a forced surrender would not be accepted. And he moved his armies forward to ring the city.

As the year's end approached with still no sign of Wolseley, Khartoum's food gave out. Every animal down to the rats had been eaten. Corpses were lying in the streets. In the solitude of the palace, Gordon was pouring his passion into his journal – a strange compound of cynicism, high faith and growing despair, scribbled over waste paper and old telegraph forms – that remains among the most poignant of English records. "I have given 6,000 lbs of biscuit out to the poor. I expect half will be stolen. . . . The shells fall about 200 yards short of the Palace. One hears the soft sighing coming nearer and nearer till they strike. . . . About forty females congregated under my window, yelling for food. . . . I have given the whole garrison an extra month's pay – I will not . . hesitate to give them £100,000 if I think it will keep the town. . . . I am worn to a shadow with the food question. Five men deserted today."

With his hair turned snow-white, he held on. One evening, with the bullets spattering against the walls, he sent for a leading merchant of the city and insisted on sitting with him in a window lit up by the largest lantern available. "When God was portioning out fear," he said to his companion, "at last it came to my turn, and there was no fear left to give me. Go, tell the people of Khartoum that Gordon fears nothing."

At Metemma, 100 miles north of the city, Wolseley's advance guard met four of Gordon's steamers, sent down to provide speedy transport for the first relieving troops. They delivered Gordon's journal, which he had handed over sewn up in a cloth before the ships left, with its urgent final plea: "NOW MARK THIS, if the Expeditionary Force does not come in ten days *the town may fall*. I have done my best for the honour of our country. Good bye." But almost simultaneously a runner brought in another message: "Khartoum is alright. Could hold out for years." It had probably been sent to deceive the Mahdi's scouts. But the British commander on the spot acted on it. Three more days were lost in overhauling the river craft and reconnoitring the country ahead. They waited too long.

Already, on January 25, 1885, the Mahdi, alarmed by Wolseley's approach, had ordered the attack. The Egyptian defenders, weakened beyond further resistance by fear and hunger, had collapsed. Six terrible hours of massacre, rape and loot had followed as the shrieking hordes burst through the streets. Gordon, spruce and cool in his dress uniform, had met the invaders on the staircase of the palace. Against the Mahdi's orders he had instantly been speared to death. His head had been cut off, his body had been flung into a well.

Two days later the steamers, crowded with troops, arrived within sight of Khartoum. They could see no flag flying from the Governor's palace, and as they neared the town they ran into a tempest of fire. Wolseley, seeking reinforcements for a further campaign against the Mahdi, was curtly told to return; and his expedition retired in some disorder down the Nile. In England, a wave of hysterical anger swept the country. Crowds gathered in Downing Street to hoot and hiss at Gladstone. He was saved by Russia: for the Russians, choosing the moment of British distraction, made a lunge towards the Oxus and India. Gladstone loosed the full fury of his oratory upon them, and succeeded in diverting public wrath from himself to the Tsar.

But beneath the surface, profound national feeling had been lastingly roused. De Lesseps, Arabi, the Mahdi: by these men imperial Britain had been dragged in remorseless succession into the Canal, Egypt, the Sudan. But nearly everyone knew that the deepening involvement could not be allowed to end in ignominy ❧

Using an antiquated steamer, a rescue force braved Dervish attacks in a final dash for Khartoum – only to find the town sacked and Gordon dead.

ROUT & REVENGE

The British government put a torch to a powder keg when in 1884 it sent General Charles Gordon to the sun-scorched Sudan, an area vital to the control of the headwaters of the Nile. Dervishes under their Mahdi, or "Messiah," were threatening Egyptian garrisons and Gordon was charged with rescuing these troops. It was a bad choice, for Gordon was stubborn, egocentric and God-intoxicated. In defiance of his orders, he challenged the Mahdi's rule – and promptly found himself besieged in Khartoum by a vast Dervish host. Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone, furious over Gordon's insubordination, dispatched a rescue column only after long Cabinet wrangling.

The delay cost Gordon his life, and Englishmen clamoured shrilly for revenge. The Mahdi had sown the wind; 13 years later his successor reaped the whirlwind as the Sudan was swept into the British Empire.

The Worst Journey in the World

The relief force that set out from Cairo in October, 1884, under Sir Garnet Wolseley might have saved Gordon – but for the Nile. Most commanders would have given the river with its rock-strewn cataracts a wide berth and approached Khartoum from the Red Sea. But Wolseley, who had led a force up Canada's raging Red River in 1870, was sure he could beat the Nile. To his dismay, he found that he could not.

There were no boats to move the 7,000-strong army over the 1,250 miles to Khartoum, and Wolseley was forced to delay until 800 boats were built. Then he had to wait for the arrival from overseas of skilled Canadian boatmen recruited to pilot his fleet. Wolseley seems to have imagined his troubles were over when the armada of little ships nosed out of Wadi Halfa on November 1, but there was so little wind that the soldiers had to take to their oars to move the flotilla. In a short time the soldiers' hands became a mass of blisters as they toiled against the fierce current.

Progress was slow enough on the river but at the cataracts, where the river roared and boiled over jagged outcrops of black basalt, the entire force ground to a halt while the boats were first unloaded and then poled and hauled upstream. The expedition became a nightmarish round of rowing, sailing, poling, hauling, unloading, carrying and reloading. Again and again this routine was repeated.

Wolseley was sick at heart. In public he maintained a brave front; in private he prayed desperately that the garrison would hold out until he arrived.

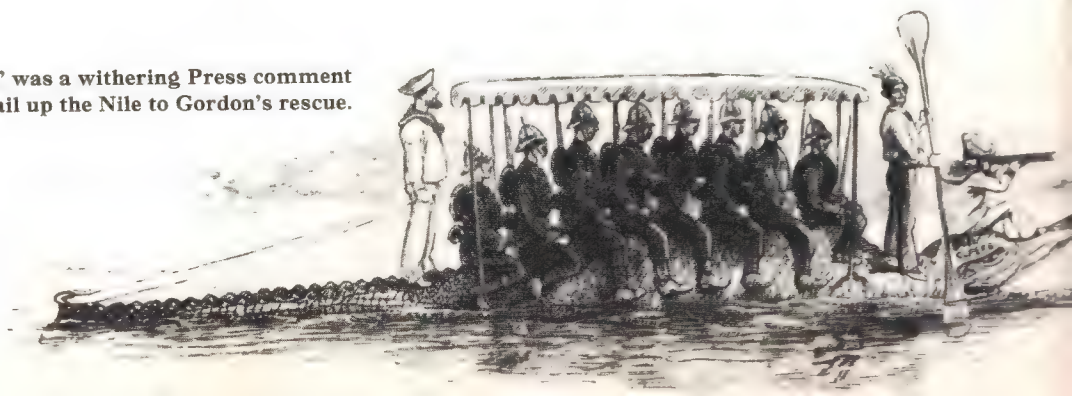
With teams of soldiers hauling on bow ropes and others poling furiously from the stern, boats were inched laboriously through the Nile's boiling cataracts and on towards Khartoum.

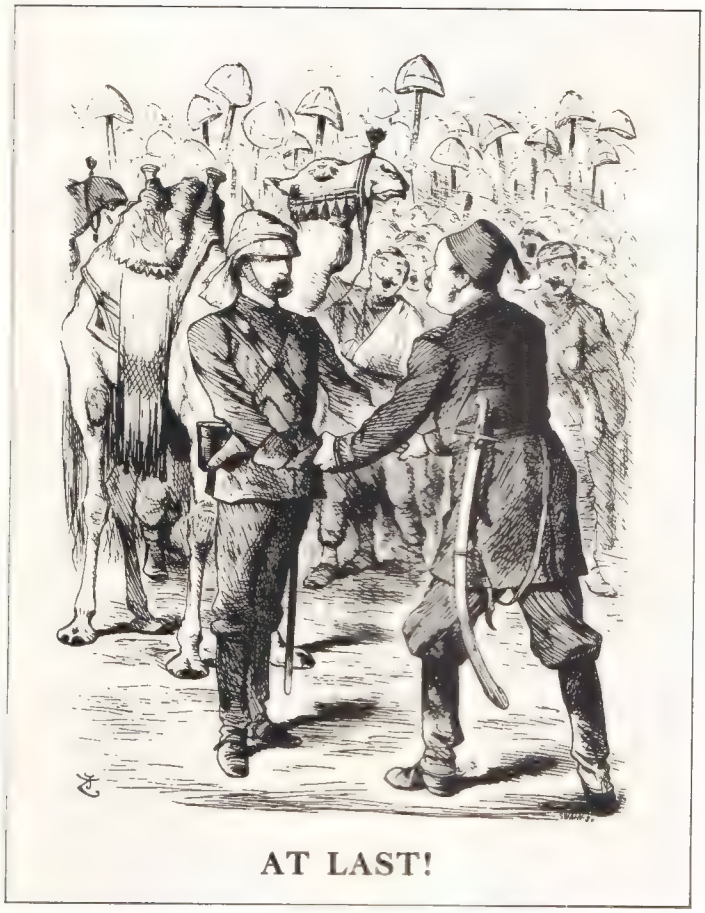
Whale-boats, with their four tons of supplies and ten men, proved unwieldy.

The transport camels, resisting a return to the arduous trudging through rocky desert, had to be pulled off the boats by force after periodic ferry trips across the Nile.

Soldiers improvised rope bridges for daring crossings of Nile rapids and to make their way to new positions from which to help haul boats.

"By crocodile to Khartoum" was a withering Press comment on Wolseley's plan to sail up the Nile to Gordon's rescue.





AT LAST!

Punch **was so sure Khartoum had been relieved that on February 7, 1885 it depicted Gordon greeting his rescuer, Sir Herbert Stewart (above). But the following week, after learning that the two men were dead, it humbly published an illustration showing a distraught Britannia before the fallen city (below).**

TOO LATE!

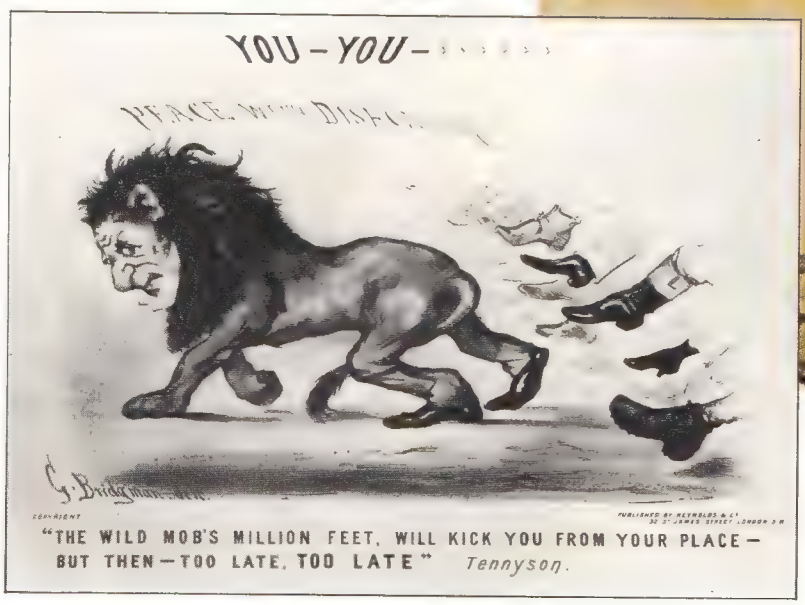
The Fall of Khartoum

As Wolseley floundered up the Nile towards Khartoum, Gordon's plight grew more and more desperate. Scarcely a day passed without a furious Dervish assault on some part of the town. In August he lost 800 of his best men in an abortive attempt to lift the siege. Many commanders might have broken under the strain, but Gordon, buoyed up by a burning religious faith, felt confident enough to tell Wolseley in a message smuggled through the lines that he was as safe in Khartoum as in a London drawing-room.

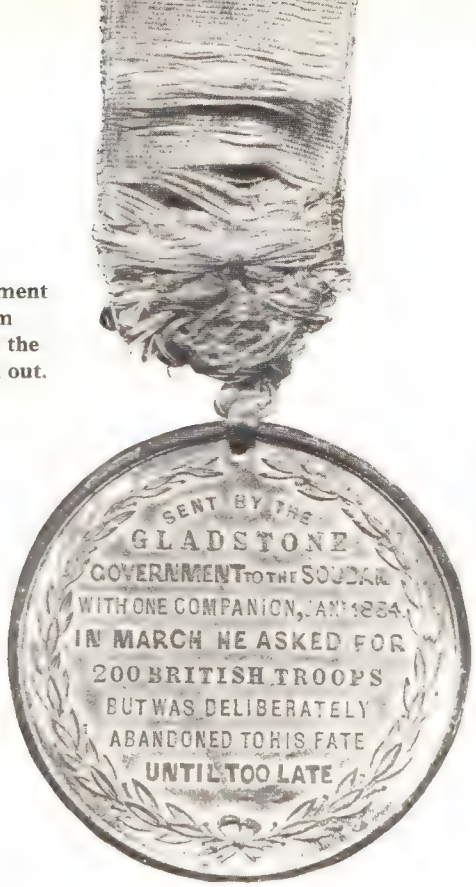
But as the Dervish net grew tighter and tighter around the town, a note of urgency crept into Gordon's messages. In mid-December he warned Wolseley that Khartoum might fall if relief did not arrive by Christmas Eve. Yet somehow the emaciated garrison struggled into the New Year, drawing what nourishment it could out of rats and mice, shoe leather, palm-tree fibre and mimosa gum.

As Wolseley's column battled its way nearer and nearer the town, the British public held its breath. For a while, it seemed Wolseley would be in time. But on January 26, 1885, the Mahdi hurled his men at the exhausted city. They swept the defenders aside and raced for the steps of the palace where Gordon, resplendent in sword and uniform stood awaiting his fate. He made no attempt to defend himself and was speedily hacked to death. When news of the disaster reached England the unfortunate Mr. Gladstone was the most convenient target for the storm of grief and indignation that swept the country.

Gladstone, a humiliated lion, is soundly kicked for his refusal to come to Gordon's aid until too late. From being the Grand Old Man he became the MOG – Murderer of Gordon.



Gordon, with the calm of a man apparently seeking death, faces the Dervishes. After being speared in his chest, he turned and meekly offered his back.



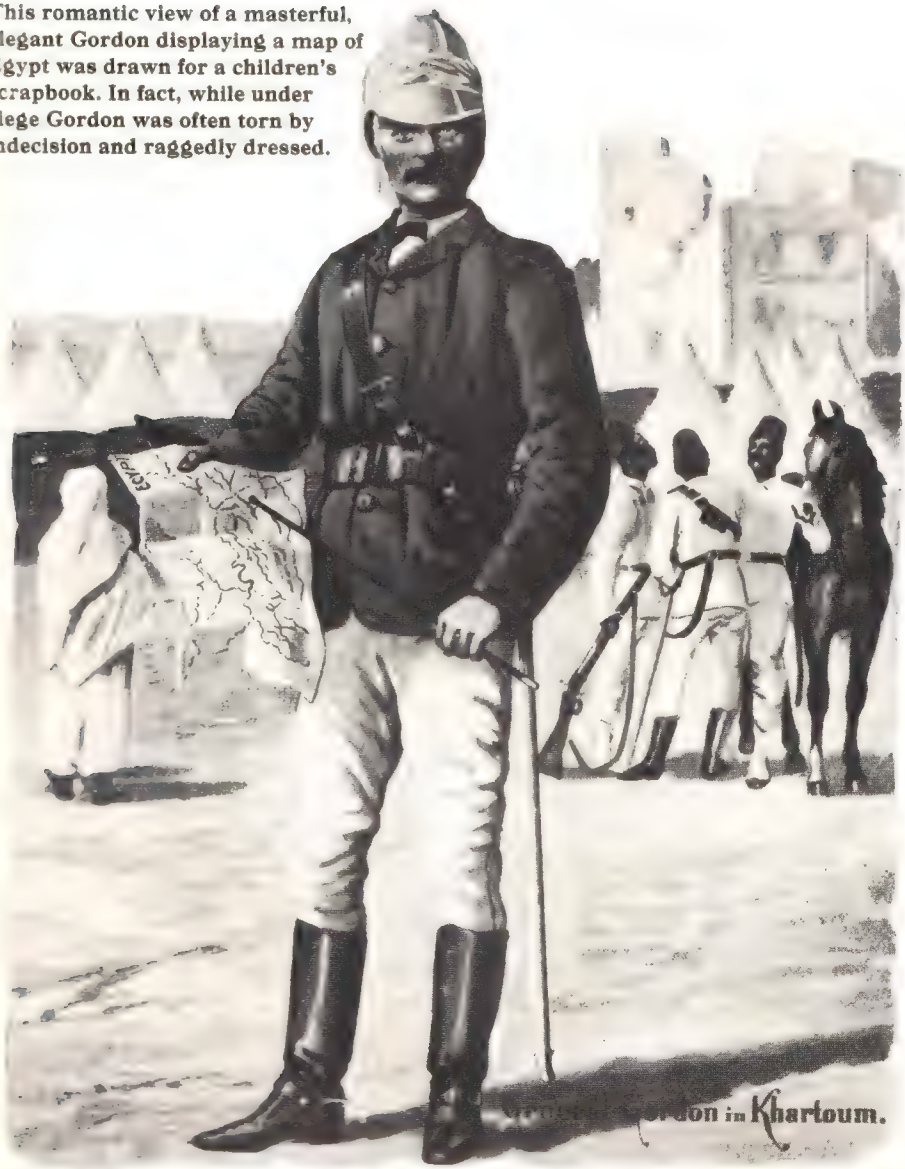
A souvenir medal reflects the bitter resentment felt for the Gladstone government after Gordon's murder. But emotionalism had clouded the facts: Gordon was not in the Sudan to demand troops but to pull them out.

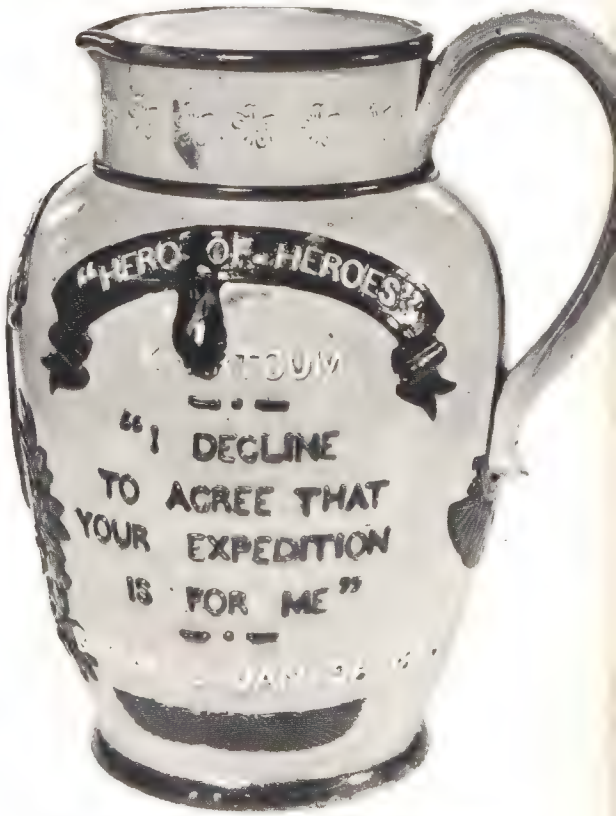
A Martyr is Born

The shockingly brutal death of the gallant, if pigheaded General Gordon was a monumental blow to national prestige. Queen Victoria was as horrified as any of her subjects. In her role as "Head of the Nation" she felt personally humiliated by the catastrophe. Her own reactions struck a deep chord of sympathy throughout England. She berated Gladstone for his obstinate refusal to speed to Gordon's rescue. Ill with indignation, the elderly monarch gained some release in an anguished letter she wrote to Gordon's sister in which she expressed her sympathy, "and that I do so keenly feel, the stain left upon England, for your dear brother's cruel, though heroic, fate."

The Queen's outrage and that of the nation were gradually soothed as Gordon made the imperceptible transition from hero to martyr, a metamorphosis aided by a State service in St. Paul's, the erection of statues and the manufacture of thousands of commemorative medals, jugs, bookmarks and figurines. Nothing in his life, it seemed, became Gordon like the leaving of it.

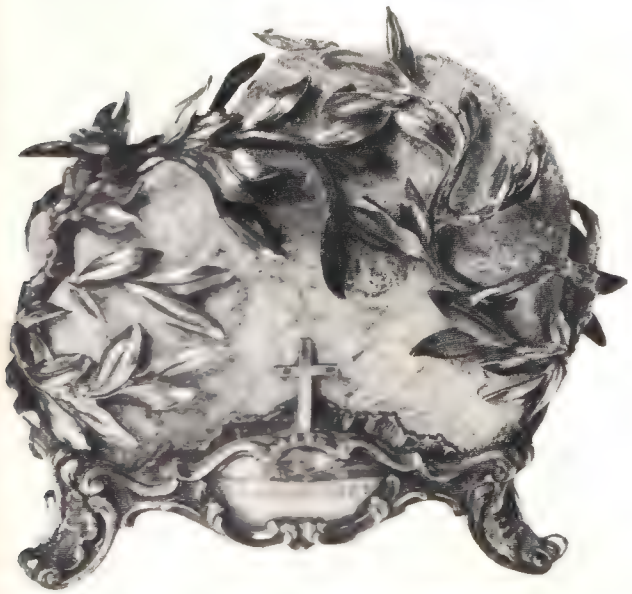
This romantic view of a masterful, elegant Gordon displaying a map of Egypt was drawn for a children's scrapbook. In fact, while under siege Gordon was often torn by indecision and raggedly dressed.





A china jug, like many other laudatory bits of contemporary bric-a-brac, records Gordon's insistence – against all evidence – that the relief expedition was sent to save not him, but Britain's honour.

A bookmarker exonerates Gordon from all blame for the disaster at Khartoum by placing it quite unfairly on one of his men whose only crime was to flee when all was lost.

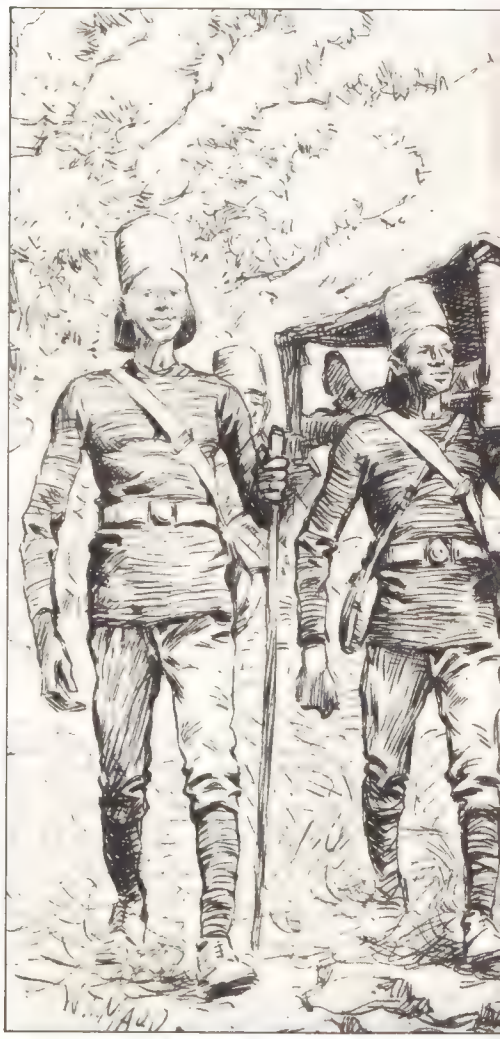


Queen Victoria, presented with this fragment of the steps on which Gordon died, promptly had it set in a delicate tracery of silver leaves like some holy relic.

General Gordon is seen at his most imposing, modelled astride a haughty camel; sculptors commissioned to commemorate the fallen hero made constant use of this pose.

The Highlanders fired their rifles so furiously at the battle of Atbara that the guns grew red hot and had to be swapped for cool ones from units waiting to go into action.

Many British officers were felled by sunstroke in the desert glare and had to be carried by native troops on protected stretchers until the ill-effects wore off.



The Road to Revenge

For 11 years after Gordon's death Britain nursed her wounded pride. Then, in 1896, General Sir Herbert Kitchener was given an Anglo-Egyptian army of 15,000 men to smash the Dervishes. He left nothing to chance. First he secured communications on the Nile with a flotilla of steamers and gunboats; then he built a railway across the waterless Nubian desert. From its terminus he would march on the Dervish capital at the little town of Omdurman near Khartoum.

As the line slowly moved forward, Kitchener imperiously pushed men and machines to the limit. His chief engineer once exploded: "You'll break the record and your own ruddy neck!" Kitchener, unmoved, pressed harder, determined to smash the Khalifa, commander of the Dervishes since the Mahdi's death in 1885.

Victory over Dervish forces at Atbara on April 8, 1898, opened the road to Omdurman. But the army had first to make an exhausting, 200-mile march. These drawings by the *Daily Graphic*'s war artist capture the atmosphere of the trek. At journey's end, the troops were lean, filthy, fatigued, sullen and grimly intent on revenge for their hardships. Kitchener was delighted.

Native girls often took pity on the Sudanese troops serving with Kitchener's army and slaked their thirst with refreshing draughts of water from goatskin bottles.

Cavalrymen watered their horses at the muddy puddles which formed in the sand whenever rain storms swept over the desert. But these were few and far between and horses were usually just as thirsty as their riders.

A native swimmer, employed by the *Daily Graphic*'s artist, carries sketches, wrapped in his turban, to the nearest steamer, always keeping a wary eye open for crocodiles.

1. Mahdi's Tomb.
2. Khartum.
3. Jebel Surgham.
4. Um Mutragar.
5. Dervish Encampment.
6. British Hospital.
7. Camel Corps.
8. Sirdar and Staff.
9. Pennon of Head Quarters.
10. 2nd Rifle Brigade.
11. Lancashire Fusiliers.
12. Northumt. Fusiliers.

OMDURMAN—THE FIRST BATTLE—6.30

SEPTEMBER 2nd, 1898.

(IN ORDER THAT THE POSITIONS OF THE DIFFERENT REGIMENTS MAY BE READILY DISTINGUISHED, THE HOME UNIFORMS H

STORY OF THE BATTLE TOLD IN HEADLINES: Reconquest of the Soudan Sir Herbert Kitchener's brilliant Victory Gordon's murderers punished The Khalifa's Army completely annihilated The S
The highest gift of Generalship Splendid courage and discipline of British, Soudanese and Egyptian Troops "A Second Balaclava Charge" —Unparalleled savage daring and heroism M

Bloodbath at Omdurman

When dawn rose at Omdurman on September 2, 1898, Kitchener was ready. His infantry, as the contemporary print (left) shows, was in line of battle, supported by artillery and reserves. Then this ruthless and ambitious man waited for the Dervish attack, confident that the outcome of the battle would crown his Egyptian career with a crushing victory.

Suddenly the first Dervish banner appeared in the distant hills. Others bobbed up alongside it, and the throb of war drums drifted on the morning air towards Kitchener's tense troops. As the men watched, a great wave of Dervishes welled up in the heights and rolled down towards the British. Kitchener could hardly believe that the Khalifa would make a frontal assault, but the spear-waving warriors swept on. None of them got closer than 300 yards; the murderous fire of machine-guns, rifles and artillery scythed down wave after wave until a ragged carpet of brown bodies, torn with vermilion wounds, covered the ground. It was more of an execution than a battle.

When the shattered Dervishes fled at midday, they left behind a staggering 11,000 dead, 16,000 wounded and 4,000 prisoners. Kitchener's losses were a mere 48 casualties. For the grievous death of Gordon, Britain had exacted a hideous revenge – and claimed it as a great victory for civilization.

Kitchener, seen as Sirdar (Commander-in-Chief) of the British-run Egyptian Army, became a peer after Omdurman. To complete his victory he destroyed the Mahdi's tomb, exhumed the body, and sent the skull to the London College of Surgeons.

A Quite Magnificent Blunder

The charge of the 21st Lancers at Omdurman shown here added a dash of idiotic heroism to what was otherwise a day of unrelieved butchery. The 21st, whose ranks included 2nd Lieutenant Winston Churchill, was on a prosaic scouting mission when the future Prime Minister spotted what he thought were about 150 Dervishes in a dried-up watercourse. The 300 Lancers broke into a headlong charge.

A horrible shock awaited them. The shallow depression was really a deep ravine, holding not a handful of men but 3,000 warriors, lined up 12 deep. It was impossible for the 21st to rein in their excited horses and so they plunged on, yelling defiantly. Churchill swept through the foe, blazing away with his pistol, and emerged unscathed. His comrades were not so lucky.

In 120 seconds, 70 cavalrymen and 119 horses were killed or wounded. Many of the dead were hacked to pieces by the frenzied Dervishes. The heroism of the troopers against such odds was so great that three of them won Victoria Crosses.

It had all been a terrible mistake. But the heroic blunders of British cavalry have – with the aid of forgiving memory – habitually been transformed into glorious feats. This charge was no exception.

II. Flashpoint at Fashoda

The re-conquest of the Sudan began in 1896. It was probably inevitable from the moment of Gordon's death: but in the intervening years reasons beside that of wounded pride accumulated.

The Mahdi died shortly after his famous victim, and his place was taken by his principal aide, the Khalifa Abdullah. Every report percolating from the Sudan confirmed that Abdullah's rule was vicious, that the slave trade was more active than ever. The influential philanthropic societies in Britain exerted constant pressure for the eradication of the regime that was fostering slavery.

Then, in 1892, Baring became Lord Cromer. It was clear that his labours in Egypt were proving a phenomenal success: the Egyptian budget was already in surplus, and the revenues were being prudently invested where they could re-multiply their yield. The country was solvent, merchants were prosperous. As for the fellaheen, after so many centuries of misery, at least forced labour and the *kurbash* had gone, and living was a little more secure. Such civilizing progress, it was urged, should not be confined to Egypt; the Sudan deserved attention.

Two years later Gladstone finally retired from politics; and the Tories who replaced him in 1895 had none of the Grand Old Man's aversion to imperial enterprise. The scramble of Europe for colonies in Africa was gathering momentum, and the Tories were quick to point to the danger of leaving a power vacuum on the Upper Nile. And from that scramble came the clinching event that was to set the wheels in motion. On March 1, 1896, the Italian army, in its attempt to occupy Abyssinia, was crushingly defeated at Adowa; and stories circulated of the mass castration of the prisoners. European prestige was at stake. Moreover, there was an Italian outpost at Kassala, just within the eastern Sudan, and the Khalifa's warriors were threatening it. Italy, with German support, appealed for diversionary help. Twelve days later the British decided to invade the Sudan.

The Sudan expedition of 1896–98 stirred public pride and patriotism as few previous imperial campaigns had done. It coincided with Victoria's Diamond Jubilee: sentiment for the British Empire was at its zenith, and the symbols of its splendour were visible on every hand. The triumphant advance up the Nile would be the crowning achievement: it would avenge the heroic dead, replace a cruel despotism by benevolent rule, add still another red patch to the map. And Kitchener, the stern silent man of action, whose grim moustaches projected the inflexible purpose of Britain, would be in command. Victory was sure – and, comfortingly, at minimum expense; for Kitchener was highly cost-conscious.

That stiff, forbidding figure, now Sirdar, or Commander-in-Chief, of the British-trained Egyptian army, had no intention of disappointing expectation. Surly, frugal, exacting, disliked by his officers for his inordinate ambition, aloof from his men yet revered by them for his unbending will, he was not the man to tarnish his own image by any hint of failure. There would be 10,000 Egyptians under British officers, and about the same number of crack British troops. They would be equipped with every modern form of weaponry and supply. Overwhelming batteries of artillery would be brought to bear, using the new high explosive, lyddite. The firepower of the rifle brigades would be formidably augmented by the new Maxim machine-guns. Powerful gunboats of novel design would be launched on the Nile; and a special railway, built across the Nubian desert, would cut out the long march round the great bend of the river above Wadi Halfa.

The objective would be Omdurman, the squalid town across the Nile from Khartoum that was the Khalifa's capital and the Mahdi's burial-place. There would, however, be no undue haste to reach it, for now there was no one awaiting relief. And at every measured step, rigid economy was to be observed.

So Kitchener's juggernaut, efficient and relentless as its master, rolled up the Nile; and in London frock-coated peers and silk-hatted bankers, clerks and cabbies, bootblacks and barmaids devoured the special editions with their telegraphed reports. They read of the only important action fought on the way: of the storming of the Emir Mahmud's barricades at the Battle of the Atbara, pipes skirling, fifes shrilling, drums beating; of Kitchener cheered to the echo by men hoisting their helmets on bloody bayonets as he rode along the lines. They read of the climax within sight of the dome of the Mahdi's tomb at Omdurman: of the Khalifa and his generals hurling their 50,000 gleaming spearpoints at the British guns; of the Egyptian brigades wheeling steadily to concentrate their deadly fire; of the 21st Lancers charging, young Winston Churchill with them; of the heaps of half-naked dead piling up before the sputtering Maxims; of the gunboats thundering from the river, Lieutenant David Beatty, a future First Sea Lord, in command of one of them; of the dark hordes fleeing vanquished into the desert; of the memorial service to Gordon, with the massed voices of the soldiers singing his favourite hymn "Abide with Me" and the British and Egyptian flags slowly rising into the azure sky; of the Sirdar who detested all emotion, unable to control his shaking shoulders.

From start to finish it had been a set-piece with a foregone denouement. But in the quieter, more rational months that followed, the hoisting of the two flags side by side took on a lasting significance. For Cromer, artist in "the springs which move governing bodies," devised a novel formula for the future governance of the Sudan: a formula that would at once mitigate the burden to Britain of annexation, keep Europe at arm's length, and acknowledge the cooperation which had routed the Khalifa. The conquered land would henceforth be ruled, and its initial development financed, by Britain and Egypt as partners. It would be a Condominium: the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.

For Kitchener, however, Omdurman was not the end of the campaign. Just before the battle he received secret orders from London which were not to be opened until Khartoum had been retaken. When the city was his, he broke the seals and read the contents. They informed him that a French party under a Captain Jean-Baptiste Marchand was believed to have crossed Africa from the west coast and to have reached the Nile farther upriver. He was to proceed upstream at once and dislodge any French force he found.

The exclusion of France from the affairs

of British Egypt – though brought about by her own choice – had all along rankled the French government. And when Britain had begun the re-conquest of the Sudan, French official anger had boiled over. Her rival's occupation, Paris had decided, must be forestalled. A token French presence should arrive on the Upper Nile before the Anglo-Egyptian army; and, joining hands with the Emperor of Abyssinia, it should formally take possession of the country round. Control of the headwaters of the Nile would be a powerful bargaining-point where Egypt was concerned.

Accordingly, while Kitchener was working his way up the Nile, Marchand was pushing across Africa from Brazzaville with seven other officers and 120 Senegalese troops. His feat was a *tour de force* calling for the highest courage and endurance, for he marched through 3,000 miles of unmapped equatorial forest and swamp. Six weeks before the Battle of Omdurman he emerged on to the Nile near a group of mud huts called Fashoda.

Fashoda was a hell-hole: malarial, and appallingly hot. Under the Egyptian regime there had been a prison in the locality for hardened criminals with life sentences. But before he left Khartoum, Kitchener got definite word from a native source that tents had been erected there, and that the tricolour was flying over them. He took with him five steamers, two battalions of Sudanese, a company of Cameron Highlanders, a battery of guns and four Maxims. And at Fashoda he duly found Marchand.

On occasion Kitchener could be a rough, harsh bully. And his strength on the immediate ground was overwhelming. But he was aware that the French government was prepared to back Marchand to the hilt, and that peace or a major European war might be in the balance. And by some quirk of fate the two men took an instant liking to each other. They dined together – Kitchener spoke fluent French – and afterwards, over coffee and liqueurs, got down to business.

Captain Jean-Baptiste Marchand made a daring bid to seize the Upper Nile for France. But his attempt came to grief at Fashoda in 1898. Confronted by Kitchener's victorious army, he retired gracefully from the little Sudanese town and returned home to be awarded the coveted Legion of Honour.

Both showed courtesy, restraint, finesse. Kitchener pointed out that his instructions were to take possession of the Upper Nile. Marchand admitted that he could not prevent him from doing so. But, he went on, he was unable to withdraw without orders from Paris. And if Kitchener used force, he and his men would die at their posts. His host was aware what that would mean. Kitchener placed his communications at Marchand's disposal; the offer was accepted.

When the encounter at Fashoda became known, a convulsion of fury seized Britain and France. The press of both countries attacked each other with unprecedented virulence. The British papers accused Paris of trying to rob their country of a hard-earned victory by a facile trick. The French insisted that Britain had abandoned the Sudan after Gordon's death; that Marchand's prior presence now made the territory theirs; that they would not be bluffed out of their rights by yet another instance of Albion's perfidy. The situation built up into a crisis of the utmost gravity: war seemed a possibility.

At this point Kitchener, having handed over to his second-in-command at Fashoda, returned to England. The hero's welcome that greeted him became a frenzied anti-French demonstration. Then the Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, rising to speak at a state banquet in his honour, announced that France had decided to withdraw; and the storm abated as quickly as it had blown up.

There were several reasons behind the decision. The French government had realized that no real help was to be expected from Abyssinia, and that their lone position on the Upper Nile was untenable. Moreover, while Britain was wholly united on the issue, opinion in France – and especially in the French army – had suddenly been torn apart by the case of Captain Dreyfus: that unjust conviction of an officer accused of spying provided a passionate rallying-point for left-wingers in a long, bitter and ultimately successful struggle against reactionaries in the army and Church.

The good sense shown by the men on the spot at Fashoda made possible a graceful French departure. And that in turn had profound consequences. A few months later the two governments signed an agreement defining their spheres of influence in equatorial Africa; this agreement was one of the factors that paved the way for the Entente Cordiale, the "friendly understanding" that set Anglo-French relations on such a smooth course in the first decade of the 20th Century. In effect, the fiery moment at Fashoda not only ended two centuries of bitter imperial rivalry, but contributed to the tremendous shift in the balance of Europe that finally answered the appearance of the German Empire in 1871.

But from the day of Arabi's downfall at Wolseley's hands, France had been asking that pertinent if awkward question: when would Britain leave Egypt?

Palmerston had defined his attitude to Egypt by an analogy: "When I travel from London to York, I like to find a comfortable inn on the road. But I do not want to own the house." Having willy nilly become the owner, Britain did much to set the house in order. The structure itself had been partly modernized before she came – by Mohammed Ali, Said and Ismail. But their supervision had been chaotic, and their financing disastrous.

Cromer changed all that. To a country by nature hard-working but distorted by centuries of unscrupulous government, he gave a long cool sight of the virtues of "sea-green incorruptibility." For a nation pinioned by foreign creditors taking shameful advantage of its inexperience, he negotiated a large measure of relief. And for a people critically dependent on water for their prosperity, he set new sights of productivity.

Cromer's irrigation engineers made possible the doubling of the sugar crop of upper Egypt, and the trebling of the cotton crop. The giant High Dam at Aswan, completed in 1968, is only an extension of the great system of water-storage and control of which Cromer's men laid the foundations.

The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, ravaged by the slave trade and by Mahdist rule, was set upon a similar road. Its first Governor-General was Lord Kitchener of Khartoum; and Cromer, in one of his more masterly understatements, said that his methods were "perhaps a little more peremptory than is usual in civil affairs." But Kitchener assembled a hand-picked group of young men from British universities, and so formed the nucleus of the Sudan Civil Service that came to rival its Indian twin in ability and devotion.

Honest, capable government; solvency; progress in physical development: great gifts, of permanent value – especially in the foetid Turko-Egyptian context of the time. But the receiver-in-bankruptcy having become the good steward, Britain could not bring herself to relax her grip: partly because the Canal she had sought to stop had become vital to her; but partly also for fear of seeing her wider work undone. And her work in Egypt inevitably came to reflect the personal beliefs and prejudices of the pro-consul who presided over it for so long.

In economic affairs, Cromer's outlook was *laissez-faire*. He encouraged foreign investment, but left it to seek profits where it could without reference to the overall benefit of Egypt. As a result, few new industries appeared to offset the country's unbalanced dependence on cotton and sugar; and in any case Europe wanted primary materials rather than industrial competition. In social matters, Cromer believed fervently in self-help: under him poverty was largely left to charity, health – except for quarantine enforcement – to private initiative, and education to the recruiting requirements of the government service.

But Egypt's deeper discontent with Cromer's rule stemmed from his perpetuation of Britain's original political misjudgments. Twice, in the early days of her intervention, she failed to perceive the genuine nature of national feeling astir from below, from end to end of the Nile. Twice she mistook national movements – of reform in the case of Arabi, of protest in that of the Mahdi – for mere outbreaks of anarchy and fanaticism. Cromer then underlined Britain's lack of feeling for the Egyptians by placing beside each Egyptian minister a British "Adviser" whose powers were far greater than their title suggested.

Since she never came to terms with national aspirations, Britain could never answer the question of when she would leave. The question of her departure was finally answered for her by Nasser in 1956. Her presence had at last come to be seen as different only in degree, not in kind, from that of the long chain of foreign conquerors that had preceded her.

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